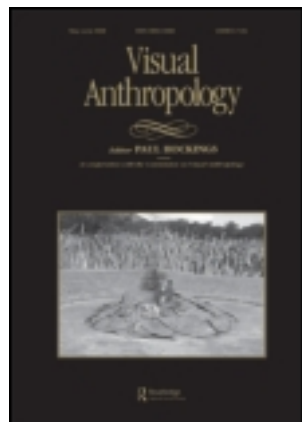


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# The Martyrs' Museum in Tehran: Visualizing Memory in Post-Revolutionary Iran

Christiane Gruber

The Central Martyrs' Museum in Tehran is the largest cultural repository in Iran displaying personal items and art relating to individuals who died during the Islamic Revolution (1979) and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). Although scholarship often considers the museum a secular invention of the Enlightenment, this study argues that it also can provide a ceremonial setting that prompts ritual activity. The Martyrs' Museum, a case in point, reveals how a cultural institution can provide a dramatic field in which visitors engage in communal acts of remembrance and mourning, thereby uniting them into a civic body. Based on analysis of this museum, its layout and displays, and interviews with its staff and visitors, this study explores the institutionalization and aesthetization of trauma and violence in post-revolutionary Iran with the aim to expand and challenge prevailing theoretical approaches to the concept of “the museum.”

## THE MODERN MUSEUM

Museums are secular products of the European Age of Enlightenment, or so the mantra goes. Displacing the church and other religious environments, in modern times museums in Europe and America became the new official repositories for the representation and transmission of local, national and universal values. In the public domain of everyday life, museums fulfill a number of functions, including the creation of collective memory and presentation of a society's highest ideals—esthetic, historical, and moral. They act essentially as cultural reliquaries of the highest order.

Over the past two decades the rather narrow definition of the museum as promoting cultural identity (and tourism) has expanded considerably to include other facets of official and popular practice. Scholars have been keen to show that museums are not just collections of “universal culture” in which human, artistic and scientific patrimonies can be assembled and elucidated through a curatorial

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voice. Rather, museums act as preservers of values that are far from being uncontested. As Carol Duncan has noted, museums function as powerful "identity-defining machines" since they represent a community and define its most authoritative truths [1991: 101–102].

As complex totalities, museums not only make ideological claims to higher truths but are also structures that embed ceremonial settings and spaces that help trigger ritual activity. Even art museums include spatial settings (many recalling church naves, ambulatories, apses, transepts, and other nodes and junctures typical of sacred spaces) and symbolically charged objects (some of which resemble relics or votaries set in shrines and niches), all to help quicken routinized behavior in their spectators. As a result, in today's art museum the aesthetic cult has carved out and achieved its own ritual precinct in which new civic practices and secular liturgies have emerged to create, consolidate and sustain the body politic [Duncan 1995: 14].

Much more so than art museums, history museums in particular create a collective memory in their viewing public by formulating dominant narratives about places and peoples. At the dawn of the 21st century history museums have, perhaps not surprisingly, become the fastest growing kind of museum in the United States, "pushing up like poppies in a battlefield" [Long 2007]. The revived popularity of history museums seems driven by today's protracted period of warfare; additionally, newly-built war and veterans' museums appear closely connected to current nationalist projects that seek to herald political leaders and military heroes as latter-day saints. These war and veterans' museums are powerful entities today since they are used as pedagogical tools for teaching history, both past and unfolding, to a young generation. They also act as marketing devices for inciting nationalist pride, as legitimizing loci for political mobilization, and as spaces for spiritual nourishment and renewal.

Contemporary history museums in America and war memorials in Europe have been the subject of detailed scholarly inquiry [Wallace 1981; Prost 1997]. Conversely, and except for one notable exception [al-Khalil 1991], a general silence prevails for war museums and memorials in the greater Middle East, itself an area that has witnessed, directly and on the ground, sectarian violence and cross-border warfare. This silence seems due to the rather recent arrival of museums in countries such as Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iran, as well as the logistic problems faced by scholars who wish to study museums in geographical areas that are often difficult to access.

Despite such hindrances contemporary war and history museums in the Islamic world have much light to shed on how official memory, alongside sanctioned religious and national values, is articulated and strategically positioned through the authoritative voice of the museum. At the same time, war and history museums in the modern Middle East force a re-evaluation and expansion of inherited scholarly paradigms that seek to explain the various symbolic functions and roles of museums as they have been discussed in a Euro-American context. In an Islamic milieu not only do we see museums continuing to function as settings for the labor and consumption of collective memory; we also cannot fail to notice that the strict dichotomy between the secular and religious realms—between the sacred and the profane—has been grossly overdrawn

[Shiner 1972], especially in the case of memorial industries that seek to celebrate and strengthen modern Islamic subjectivities.

One case in point is the Central Martyrs' Museum (*Muza-yi Shuhada'*) in Tehran, a place that is part memorial and part museum. It is dedicated to commemorating the deceased heroes of the Revolution (1979) and the martyrs<sup>1</sup> of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88). Originally built in 1980 to memorialize martyrs of the Revolution, the museum underwent two phases of expansion and renovation: first in 1996, to accommodate martyrs of the Iran–Iraq War; and more recently in 2006, at which time the museum's third floor was modernized and redesigned to include a section dedicated to women martyrs.<sup>2</sup> Covering four floors and containing over 300 rooms it is by far the most important martyrs' museum in Iran. However, it is by no means unique: at least twelve other martyrs' museums, some also called "martyrs' treasures" (*ganjinaha-yi shuhada'*), are located in Tehran and other major cities in Iran. Today many others are being built throughout the country, or are planned in former Iran–Iraq war zones.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the Martyrs' Museum in Tehran is the most comprehensive example of a new genus of memorial-museums that are, quite literally, "pushing up like poppies in a battlefield" in post-revolutionary Iran.

Like others of its kind in Iran, the Martyrs' Museum effectively generates a new sacred space—that is, a place of religious consecration through the discursive potential of spatial elements and the visitors' interactions with them—as well as a new model of bereavement. Within this new museological context official rhetoric blends sanctifying elements in order to provide the viewer with charged spaces and cadenced routes. Much like war memorials more broadly, these kinds of museum are intended to reiterate communal values while also localizing and facilitating an ongoing mourning process [Winter 1995: 78].

As the years pass, battlefields vanish, and today's younger generation in Iran has had no first-hand experience of the Revolution or war, the Martyrs' Museum becomes a necessary locus of remembrance in which both individual and collective memory can be constructed, affixed, updated and reaffirmed. Today's generational turnover highlights a critical moment in Iran's history, as it marks that interim period during which direct memory passes into cultural memory [Ashplant *et al.* 2000: 34]. In order to reaffirm certain religious or national values that might perish with the passing of an older generation, a number of individuals and agencies have tried to combat the onset of national amnesia by fastening memorial practices to specific sites, including the many martyrs' museums opened in recent years. As Pierre Nora has noted with regard to memorials more broadly, this kind of museum-memorial without a doubt serves as a *lieu de mémoire*, or site of memory, when the *milieux de mémoire*, or real environments of memory, cease to exist [1989: 7].

Like the telling of history, however, the presentation of memory is never an innocent or straightforward operation. Memory—be it individual, collective, social or public—is essentially a construction of the past, and the past is eminently contestable, interpretable and manipulable. Furthermore, as scholars in memory studies have pointed out, memory is "always constructed and reconstructed by the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, shaped by semantic and interpretive frames, and subject to a panoply of distortions" [Cattell and

Climo 2002: 1]. These many selective tools and methods are certainly in operation in the Martyrs' Museum, whose pantheon of heroes, rhetorical models, visual strategies and religious symbols merge to generate a new religio-cultural industry that attempts to salvage a decidedly fading national memory by consolidating it through spatial and visual means.

## THE LOCUS OF MEMORY

The Martyrs' Museum falls under the charge of the administrative office overseeing Iran's "treasuries" (*idara-yi ganjinaha*), belonging to the large and very powerful para-statal organization known as the Martyrs' Foundation (*Bunyard-i Shahid*). This Foundation was established one month after the Islamic Revolution, with the confiscated assets and properties of the Shah. Today it is a true economic powerhouse, boasting several hundred companies active in various sectors of the Iranian economy [Saeidi 2004: 488; Maloney 2000: 151]. Besides its commercial successes the Foundation's main and more noble responsibilities include caring for the families of the deceased of the Revolution, as well as the disabled and handicapped veterans of the war, by providing educational support, housing services, medical insurance and other forms of social and economic assistance [Amirahmadi 2001: 236]. It is thus a Foundation that is not wholly of the state nor wholly distinct from it [Maloney 2000: 148]—as well as an organization that engages in both business transactions and philanthropic work.

Besides its dedication to helping those who suffered from the ravages of the Revolution and war, one of the Foundation's foremost goals is to promote martyrdom as a worthy undertaking and as a cultural goal unto itself [Gruber 2008a: 183–185]. This so-called "culture of martyrdom" (*farhang-i shahadat*) has been defined by various supporters of the Islamic Revolution—including one of its leading ideologues, Dr. Ali Shariati (died 1977)—as standing firm in the face of adversity and the willingness to die for a just cause [Abedi and Legenhausen 1986: 214]. In Shiite milieux in particular, the legitimacy and symbolic power of martyrdom has often been derived through analogies to the politico-religious mission and tragic death of Imam Hoseyn at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. Basing themselves on the "Hoseyn paradigm," Shariati and other modern Iranian writers described both the Islamic Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War as quintessentially legitimate, as they represent the struggles of radical activists and conquering heroes fighting in the path of God [Aghaie 2004: 103; Bayat 1985: 25; Ram 1996]. Perhaps more poignantly, through such Karbala metaphors, past events turned into living realities, which then became powerful trans-historical events deeply embedded within the legitimizing landscape of Shiite soteriology.

More than any other para-statal organization in Iran, the Foundation has contributed to the formulation of martyrdom as a glorified endeavor and as a religio-national "culture" to be supported and nurtured. The conceptual result emerges from a wide range of cultural activities, including the establishment of schools, universities and research centers, the publication of books, magazines and journals, the production of films and documentaries, and the hosting of



art festivals and book exhibitions [Saeidi 2004: 487]. Furthermore, by sponsoring large murals representing martyrs of the Revolution and war—an artistic mission whose logistics are laid out in detail in its charter [*Ashna-i ba Bunyad* 1985: 60]—the Foundation is by far the most important player in creating a visual culture of martyrdom in post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>4</sup>

To add to these varied enterprises, we can now add one more category, the museological, thanks to the Foundation's establishment and continued financing of more than a dozen martyrs' museums in Iran. Through the mechanism of the museum this particular para-statal organization has effectively institutionalized its stated mission to glorify and memorialize those who gave their lives for a greater cause. These causes are the Islamic Revolution and Iran–Iraq War, as well as their continued yet fragile remembrance.

Much like its sponsoring body, the museum's outer appearance is intended to convey certain ideas about public memory as it is dispensed through the "redemptive" channel of martyrdom. The museum is housed in a rather drab cement building with four floors: a ground floor containing display windows, two upper floors, and a basement floor that cannot be seen from the outside [Figure 1]. With its blinded and reflective windows in the upper two floors this neo-sacred space appears rather frigid and impermeable as it sequesters itself away visually from the prosaic world. Furthermore, its outer form appears almost corpse-like: rigid in form, pallid in tones, altogether lifeless, thereby foreshadowing the rather inclement nature of the displays and objects within.

The Martyrs' Museum in Tehran uses certain techniques to draw attention to its function while also isolating it from the street. With its cold gray tones and



Figure 1 Front entrance of the Martyrs' Museum, Tehran. (Photo © author, November 2007; color figure available online)

sepulchral shape, it suggests an oversized coffin, thus creating a "set-apart" aura typical of sacred spaces [Evans 2003: 35–38]. It also includes windows that are purposely closed so that the inside memorial space is not contaminated by the outside world, and also so that the viewers strolling within its spaces do not have their attention drawn away from the "sacred realm." By creating a detached sepulchral zone this kind of memorial–museum overtly stakes the claim that it occupies a space not belonging to quotidian life.

Although the Martyrs' Museum sets itself apart visually, it does connect with the street too. The windows on the ground floor communicate directly with passers-by through a series of display cases filled with various photos, inscriptions, objects and symbols. For example, one vitrine includes warfront photos, Shiite inscriptions, the word "martyr" (*shahid*) sprouting out of a crimson-colored tulip, and various war vestiges, including a dirt-covered helmet, a broken water flask and a laminated copy of a letter. The blood-red tulip is part of the logo of the Bunyad-i Shahid because it symbolizes the revival of a whole community through an individual's martyrdom—itself often likened by revolutionary writers to a transfusion of blood into an anemic society.

The display cases lining both sides of the Martyrs' Museum mediate between the sidewalk and the museum's interior. By using the retail strategies of department stores, especially storefront windows and display cases laden with goods, the museum's vitrines attempt to draw pedestrians inside by showing what is available inside [Sewell 2003: 87]. Like stores displaying their wares, the museum too uses contemporary advertising tactics to entice pedestrians to pause for a moment, observe the items on display, and hopefully become curious enough to pay the museum a visit. Lined with these kinds of exhibited items the street thus functions not only as a retail space but also as a landscape for political action and persuasion [Sewell 2003: 86]. If one can compare passers-by to window shoppers, then through its vitrines this museum is selling a particular product: martyrdom, along with all of its trappings.

Martyrdom is not left unmediated, either on the outside or the inside of the museum; on the contrary, it is deliberately inscribed within dominant religious and nationalist discourses. On the building's exterior, for instance, Shiite slogans and sayings are included in the display cases, while the oversize helmet capping the front entrance sports a red banner with a vocative inscription reading *Ya Husayn-i Shahid!* ("O Hoseyn, the Martyr!" as in Figure 1). The banded helmet overtly declares the Martyrs' Museum as falling within the parameters of the Shiite faith. It also pays tribute to Iranian martyrs of the Iran–Iraq War who wore bandannas bearing vocative blessings, such as *Ya Husayn-i Shahid!* and *Ya Husayn-i Mazlum!* ("O Hoseyn, the Persecuted One!"). War helmets and their inscribed bands are pervasive in the museum's displays because they bear material witness to the martyr's physical disappearance. Further, they serve to bolster the specifically Shiite messages.

The Hoseyn metaphor reigns supreme in the Martyrs' Museum. Commonly referred to as the "Prince of Martyrs" (*Sayyid al-Shuhada'*), Imam Hoseyn (died 680 CE) is the paradigmatic example of an unwavering fighter-turned-martyr [Aghaie 2004: 87–112]. Moreover, as Wayne Husted has aptly noted in his study of Hoseyn as a role model in Shiism, the Imam acts as a kind of "reservoir of

images used to embellish the sacred biographies—both oral and written—of other martyrs who have followed him” [Husted 1993: 278]. In the context of this memorial-museum, the remembrance of Imam Hoseyn and martyrs more broadly is explicitly filtered through a Shiite lens, adding a visibly sectarian slant to death and its commemoration.

The Martyrs’ Museum operates in space as an instrument for remembering and strengthening the tenets of the Islamic Revolution. Through its display cases the museum also embraces the tools of advertising, to draw in the crowds and remind viewers that it is the locus where the memory of the Iran–Iraq War is also lodged and prolonged. The shape of memory in this instance is embodied through the museum, itself a cavernous and set-apart space. Similarly memory emerges from lived practices that are often implicated in ideologies involving cultural norms and issues of authenticity, identity and power [Cattell and Climo 2002: 4]. In the Martyrs’ Museum in particular, national (Iranian) and religious (Shiite) ideologies form the primary vectors through which memory is constructed and arbitrated in the public domain.

#### MEMORY’S RELIQUARY

The Martyrs’ Museum functions as an architectonic reliquary housing the physical remnants and material *spolia* of the Revolution and war. Besides placing these objects on display through various strategies to highlight their aesthetic qualities, including spotlighting, spatial isolation and the use of lustrous fabrics,<sup>5</sup> the museum also draws the viewers’ attention to their material authenticity in order to emphasize the living reality of a lost past. Not only do the relics serve as visual props to tell stories about specific individuals, they also add a more personal dimension to the medley of voices brought under the fold of a master narrative.

The objects contained within the museum’s “relics cases” (*ganjinaha-yi asar*) are varied. They include small Korans and Koran stands, laminated portraits of Khomeini (sometimes bloodied), prayer beads and clay tablets, rosaries, rose-water flasks, rings with carnelian stones, shirts, weapons, hats, helmets, headbands, bandannas, ear-warmers, personal letters, poetry, robes, shirts, handkerchiefs, identity cards, eyeglasses, photographs, watches, medals, currency, bags, shoes and cassette tapes [Figure 2]. These many objects form a kind of ethnographic “salvage collecting” [Clifford 1997], an accumulation of artifacts that not only ensures their survival as material witnesses to past events but also provides a method of object-based representation that facilitates the viewer’s personal exchange with many of the deceased figures dwelling in this symbolically charged “contact zone.”

Although a richly textured life-story narration emerges through the mosaic work of object-based biographies,<sup>6</sup> the voices of victims are nevertheless carried through and verbalized by the selective choices of the curator. Often the objects are selected not only for their symbolic overtones but also for their overall aesthetic potential, one fulfilled in yet another artistic device, the palimpsestic relic painting [Figure 3].<sup>7</sup> Here tangible war *spolia*—a boot, shirt, backpack, helmet with an inscribed band, leather belt, thermos, small rose-water flask, metal





Figure 2 Relics case with various objects, including a helmet with a bandanna that reads Ya Husayn-i Mazlum! ("O Husayn, the Persecuted One!"), Martyrs' Museum, Tehran. (Photo © author, November 2007; color figure available online)



Figure 3 Gold-painted collage of war relics, signed by the artist Ansari and dated 1379/2001, Martyrs' Museum, Tehran. (Photo © author, November 2007; color figure available online)

identity tag, carnelian ring, miniature Koran, prayer beads, and prayer tablet made of clay—turn into a painting through a process of collage reminiscent of the war mounds of Roman times [Duncan 1995: 94; Jones 1996: 152], as well as modern paintings made from “found art.” These salvaged objects are literally encrusted or preserved in gold-colored paint, decorated and contained, as it were, much as Christian relics were in their medieval reliquaries. The ready-made objects are assembled into an art form through a twofold process of assemblage and over-painting: they transcend their material natures to become a votive offering of sorts. Through this artistic approach, the vestiges of war are imagined in this painting (as well as throughout the museum’s display cases) in an overtly aesthetisizing manner.

Besides relics placed in cases or made into painted collages, other items encircle the museum’s galleries. Specific items included in the cases honor some of the martyrs’ hobbies or athletic abilities. These include, to name just a few, weights for body-building, parachutes for sky-diving, and coloring books for drawing and painting. Some objects also speak to a few choice martyrs’ important cultural contributions: for example, a movie reel is included in the relics case of Murtaza Avini (died 1993), the eminent cinematographer of the Iran–Iraq War.<sup>8</sup> Lastly a number of made-to-order maquettes have been placed within some cases to mark some of the martyrs’ particular professional expertises or their high standing in government (for example, a model of an oil refinery is included in the relics case of a former Minister of Oil).

Perhaps the most evocative mock-ups in the museum’s displays are the miniature replicas of an Iraqi tank and a small hand grenade included at the bottom of the relics case of Mohammad Hoseyn Fahmida and his brother Da’ud Fahmida [Figure 4]. On the top shelf appear black-and-white portrait photos of the Fahmida brothers, with a jump rope carefully coiled between them and a white silk tunic hanging above. The jump rope, along with the plastic models below, which look similar to the toys young boys use in their war games, certainly evokes the youth of the brothers: Mohammad died on the war front when 15 and his brother at the age of 19. The two white laminated cards give the viewer basic information about both teenagers, including the place and dates of their deaths during the Iran–Iraq War.

Mohammad Hoseyn Fahmida was (and still is) the archetypal symbol of the boy martyr in Iran. He became famous for enlisting in the *basiji* forces despite his age. His martyrdom is well-recorded in narrative sources about the war as well as commemorated in Tehran’s mural arts program.<sup>9</sup> In order to counter the Iraqi tanks approaching the city of Khoramshahr at the beginning of the war in 1980, he decided to use his own body as a last line of defense. Attaching several grenades to his waist, he held one in his hand, threw himself under an Iraqi tank, and pulled the grenades’ pins with both hands as he shouted, “*Labayka, ya Khomeyni!*” (Here I come, O Khomeini!). His self-sacrificial assault turned him into a powerful and pervasive icon of the war, while his feat gained him the honor of being named “our leader” (*rahbar-i ma*) by Imam Khomeini himself [Davis 2003: 50–51; Brown 1990: 2; Khomeini 1996: 306]. His relics case provides an exultation of the sacrifice of Iran’s younger generation as well as a grim reminder of what happened to the boys who wanted to “play war” in real life.



Figure 4 Relics case of Mohammad Hoseyn Fahmida and his brother Da'ud Fahmida, with black-and-white portrait photos, a white shirt, and a jump rope (above) and plastic models of a tank and hand-grenade (below), Martyrs' Museum, Tehran. (Photo © author, November 2007; color figure available online)

Although plastic toys and maquettes help contextualize the death of boy martyrs, other vestiges of the Iran–Iraq War contained in the museum cases serve as metonymic devices to help induce the symbolic presence of the deceased. Although none of the cases contains body parts—according to Islamic custom, these must be quickly interred within a burial ground—they do include items that bear witness, through physical contact with the deceased's body, of his continuing presence. As a result of such contact relics the museum cases function somewhat like cenotaphs. Literally meaning “empty tombs,” Islamic cenotaphs act as burial markers to honor the deceased whose remains are buried in the ground elsewhere. The many cenotaph-like cases throughout the building symbolically transform it into a large-scale protective canopy or crypt, thereby updating and creatively expanding the long-lived tradition in the Islamic world of erecting bodiless monuments dedicated to the memory of the deceased.<sup>10</sup>

Contact relics certainly include helmets and various clothing items, but perhaps the most powerful remnants in the museum are the martyrs' shoes [Figure 5]. On a symbolic level, shoes bear witness to an individual's last stand, to his feet implanted on the earth and not buried in it. They are the tangible shells of physical locomotion, recording someone's last step in life. Unlike helmets they are highly individualized in shape, size and material (especially leather, whose olfactory discharge evokes the smell of decayed skin). Moreover, their various conditions—bullet-ridden, dirt-covered, blood-stained, mud-caked, creased, hunched over, and broken down—speak to the way an individual perished. As





Figure 5 Relics case containing mud-caked shoes, Martyrs' Museum, Tehran. (Photo © author, November 2007; color figure available online)

physical vestiges of a martyr's bodily self and as the final raconteurs of his life story they fulfill both iconic and narrative functions.

Like other contact relics shaped to fit or to contain parts of the human body, shoes are particularly resonant because, as shaped reliquaries, they function as metaphors for both the fragmentation and the reconstitution of the body, both for a dead person and for the collective corpus of a vanished community. Additionally, other kinds of relics in the Martyrs' Museum offer even more intimate evocations of the dismembered body, nowhere better expressed than in prosthetic limbs [Figure 6]. Many Iranian soldiers were injured by gunfire or dismembered by landmines while fighting in the trenches or on the battlefield during the Iran–Iraq War. In fact their numbers were so high that a para-statal organization, the Foundation for the Oppressed and Wounded (*Bunyard-i Mostazafan va Janbazan*), was made responsible for providing medical services and other social benefits to ensure their and their families' welfare [Maloney 2000: 153–66].<sup>11</sup>

The relics case containing a prosthetic arm belongs to a certain Hadi Musavi, who died on the Iraqi warfront. It is in the museum's second-floor gallery dedicated to martyrs from Iran's various provinces. It also contains a photograph of Ayatollah Khomeini tucked into a blood-stained plastic sleeve. These kinds of photographic portraits of Iran's supreme leader were pervasive during the war years, his picture attached to soldiers' uniforms to both guide them and protect them from harm.<sup>12</sup> Along with the apotropaic photo of the Ayatollah appear objects associated with prayer. They include a clay prayer tablet on top of an embroidered velvet pouch, as well as a rosary (*tasbeih*) and a rose-water flask.



Figure 6 Relics case with a prosthetic arm, objects used in prayer, and a photo of Khomeini contained in a bloodied plastic sleeve, Martyrs' Museum, Tehran. (Photo © author, November 2007; color figure available online)

The display has been carefully arranged so as to suggest that the prosthetic arm is grasping onto the prayer beads, thus adding a pious dimension to Hadi Musavi's initial injury and his eventual death.

The prosthetic arm relic invites comparison to medieval Christian relics and reliquaries shaped like arms. Although admittedly not fulfilling the same functions, there are nevertheless some intriguing symbolic overlaps between both practices. In medieval Europe body-part or shaped reliquaries were common, the most popular being in the shape of the right forearm. Many arm reliquaries included bones of saintly figures (though the bones were not necessarily part of the saint's or martyr's forearm). As Cynthia Hahn has shown in her study of these so-called "speaking" objects, arm-shaped reliquaries were particularly powerful in Christian devotional practice because they could be used as stage-props for liturgy and as tools to give benediction, as well as to transmit sacred power and blessings to devout viewers [Hahn 1997: 22]. In more figurative terms they also represented the "arm" of the body of the Church, an affirmation of the sacrality of corporeality and a celebration of the restoration of the dismembered body [*ibid.*: 27–28].

Within the context of the Martyrs' Museum and the Iran–Iraq War, the prosthetic arm fulfills similar purposes qualitatively. The prosthesis is a right forearm, the preferred limb of the human body indicative of cleanliness, virtue and faith. Moreover, the Persian word for "right" (*rast*, with a short "a") is linguistically close to the term for "righteousness" (*rāst*, with a long "ā"), much as the English translations of the terms. The arm prosthesis thus signals through



a *pars pro toto* the martyr's moral rectitude, itself further strengthened by items pointing to his abiding piety even in death. As a result, the prosthesis becomes sanctified through the religious paraphernalia in the case. Similarly, that it bears witness to corporeal fragmentation points toward the possible restitution of the collective body through dismemberment and blood-shedding. As a material crutch for visually reaffirming that individual sacrifices at that moment were for national freedom and the greater good of society, this arm, to borrow Pierre Nora's fitting expression, acts as an eloquent *aide-mémoire* or "prosthesis-memory" [1989: 14].

Much like the blood-stained plastic slip containing Khomeini's photo in Hadi Musavi's case, many of the items in the Martyrs' Museum carry blood stains. Most typical among them are white undershirts, worn close to the body and thus forming the first protective "dressing" after a soldier had been wounded or killed by gunfire in the upper body. Alongside bloodied garments many cases include documentary photos that do not shy away from the sanguine. In several instances they appear as a pair, showing the moments "before" and "after" an individual's death. Such is the case with the display of Mahmud Kavah, containing color photos that show him in prayer while alive, and his bloodied body after death [Figure 7]. Between the two photos in the case's upper shelf are his shirt, a Koran and verses of poetry praising his martyrdom (the lower shelf displays his helmet and belt). The Koran's strategic placement, acting as a visual pathway between the photographic representations of Mahmud Kavah's life and death,



Figure 7 Relics case of Mahmud Kavah, with a Koran, lines of poetry, and photos of Kavah in prayer and in death, Martyrs' Museum, Tehran. (Photo © author, November 2007; color figure available online)

adds a distinctly religious dimension to his act of martyrdom while also serving as the metaphorical "straight path" (*al-sirat al-mustaqim*) for man on his quest for salvation in the afterlife.

Such photos do not hold back from openly showing a dead body, using an emphatic mode of representation to convey the finality of death. Moreover, the recurring prominence given to blood in the museum raises some key questions regarding the cultural, religious and political motivations behind a method of curatorial display that, at least to modern Euro-American sensibilities, might look morbid, offensive or simply in bad taste. A few words on the cultural constructs and symbolic understandings of blood in modern Iran are therefore necessary.

During the Iran–Iraq War blood was essentially understood within the context of the Prophet Mohammad's bloodline and the sacrifice of members of his family (the *ahl al-bayt*) at the Battle of Karbala. Their sacrificial acts—i.e., the blood they spilled—were seen as necessary for the continuation and re-vivification of the Shiite community. In other words, earlier sacrifices were framed as both pre-emptive and redemptive. The Iran–Iraq War was couched as a new Karbala, and the blood shed by its neo-martyrs became an extension of past events and the necessary transfusion of life into a community facing potential moral and/or physical destruction. As the leading revolutionary thinker Ayatollah Muttahhari (died 1979) noted:

At no time is the blood of a martyr (*shahid*) wasted. It does not flow into the ground. Every drop of it is turned into hundreds of thousands of drops, nay into tons of blood, and is transfused into the body of his society. [...] Martyrdom means the transfusion of blood into a society, especially into a society suffering from anemia. It is the *shahid* who infuses fresh blood into the veins of society. [Abedi and Legenhausen 1986: 136]

In death the martyr thus offers his blood—a fluid indicative of life rather than death, a fluid to be placed on full display rather than antiseptically air-brushed out of the picture—for the sake of the collective corpus. Within such cultural understandings of death, blood is not contamination and pollution; it is consecration and regeneration.

The emphasis on bodily violence and blood within a museological context might also be seen as a voyeuristic obsession with mortuary representations of the physical body, leading to what Farhad Khosrokhavar has called a kind of "necrophilic aesthetics" in post-revolutionary Iranian cultural production [Khosrokhavar 1995: 233; 1997: 175]. However, this hyper-realistic mode of display does not merely disclose a fascination with death that may be repellent to modern sensibilities or museological "good taste." Rather, in the case of the Martyrs' Museum, blood is a powerful visual vestige of the vanished body that can be put to aesthetic use within the gallery displays. It is also a tangible trace of a past that allows viewers to become visually co-present with death and so take part in the labor of memory, itself forming both the museum's ontological prefix and suffix.

Just like the traces of blood, the photos included in the cases serve as momentary records of a person's existence and then his death. By stressing death's inevitability these images employ a method of photography that is quite different from that practiced by media outlets in contemporary America. More specifically,

photographs accompanying news stories (including the events of 9/11) depict what Barbie Zelizer has called the “subjunctive voice” [2004: 168–180]. This subjunctive mode—the “what if?” of optional endings—is embedded in photos showing impending death, not death or its immediate aftermath. As a result, viewers are spared human gore, and they can project alternative meanings or ends. In other words, “subjunctive” photos deny the finality of death by embracing visually the conceptual exigencies of conditionality and hypothesis.

The subjunctive photographic image can thus help alter memory and project new and less ghastly conclusions through a visual *dénouement* that is left open to the viewer’s interpolations. As such, photos aid in constructing memory by enhancing a vision of the past, even altering it in the mind’s eye. While photographs of atrocities in modern Euro-American traditions opt for a sanitized, conjectural mode of possibly changed endings, the photographic image in post-revolutionary Iran (and in other Islamic areas) embraces the assertive, literal mode. As Roland Barthes has aptly noted, photos of violent death such as those included in the Martyrs’ Museum are particularly compelling because the visual, rather than the oral or written, conveys best the pre-intellectualized immediacy of a traumatic event, since trauma itself is understood as a “suspension of language” [1977: 30]. The photos in the museum therefore convey the bluntness and horror of the Iran–Iraq War, visually suspending the “what if?” of language itself.

Photographs are not just objective or authentic narrative devices in visual form, however. Indeed, as Susan Sontag has highlighted in her studies of image-making practices, the contingency of photos confirms that reality, or rather the presentation and perception of reality, can be both veracious and falsificatory, especially when it comes to creating culturally acceptable iconographies for human suffering [1979: 80; 2003]. What is more, the photo can be seen to cross existential lines, so becoming co-substantial with its subject and acting as a surrogate possession of a cherished person [Sontag 1982: 351]. Reality, image and being all have the potential to become intermingled and interchangeable through the photographic mode, a particularly salient method of visual communication in a museum that tends to blur the boundaries of each one of these ontologies.

Photographs are loaded with connotative meanings depending on their formal compositions, their external texts, their curatorial surroundings and their visual interlocutors. Returning to the two photos of Mahmud Kavah showing him standing in prayer while alive and lying bloodied in death [Figure 7], it becomes clear that these photos impart the supplementary message of the virtue of piety in both life and death. For instance, Kavah’s prayer pose acts essentially as a readily decipherable semiotic sign: the signifier is the praying martyr and the signified is the righteousness of a pious death, the latter made all the more clear by a religious object (the Koran) that serves to further establish the moral rectitude of the deceased. In this case as in many others, the photo is not just an object-product but more broadly an object-sign that is constituted by a visual syntax of signification that partakes in what Roland Barthes has called a “period rhetoric” [1977: 18]. In the “period rhetoric” of post-revolutionary Iran, and in the Martyrs’ Museum in particular, the photographic message forms part and parcel of a multi-media project mobilized in order to give meaning and sustenance to

national memory through a religiously inflected, emphatic mode of visual presentation.

#### MEMORY'S RITUALIZATION

The Martyrs' Museum is not just a "salvaged" stack of objects organized in a slapdash or unsystematic fashion. Much thought has gone into the aesthetics of the displays. Indeed, the museum's interior spaces have been carefully planned so as to convey certain spatial relations and prompt particular kinds of interactive behavior. Indeed, their plans and gallery displays museums such as this one include spatial elements—i.e., prescribed routes, sequenced circuits, and objects arranged so as to prompt a viewer's response—that blend the seemingly vernacular environment of the museum with the religious plane of sacred experience. After all, museums remove their visitors from the vulgar flux of life [Duncan 1995: 15] and can thereby prove to be spiritually transformative. Acting as the *dramatis personae* within the larger performance field that is the museum, visitors can thus experience "other" dimensions while also entering into contact with the immortal spirits of the past—be these artistic geniuses or deceased heroes.

In the case of the Martyrs' Museum a range of spatial devices, installation techniques and visual motifs highlight the fact that this museum is intended to act as a ritual zone with clearly defined paths and hierarchies. As a zone for the remembrance of trauma and death, the museum's galleries act in a processual and discursive manner, retrieving buried or repressed memories. Scholars working within the field of trauma studies have underscored that the retrieval of lost memory and the activation of cognition (e.g., through psychoanalysis or psychotherapy) act as "talking cures," fulfilling the "necessity of articulating the traumatic experience to a listener or witness" [Leydesdorff *et al.* 1999: 3]. By verbalizing and sharing in the burden of pain the Martyrs' Museum therefore also has the potential of becoming a therapeutic zone, if the visitor actively interacts with its spaces and is conversant with its visual language.

From a spatial perspective many of the galleries are arranged as longitudinal naves, framed with alternating vertical and horizontal cases, leading to an apse-like space marked by a larger tripartite relics case [Figure 8]. Other galleries are laid out in an octagonal fashion, with cases radiating from a central pole in the room, a centrifugal design that allows for a more ecumenical treatment of the display as well as a spatial device that forces the viewer to circumambulate. In the case of the elongated galleries a strict hierarchy is borne out by the apse-like case at the showroom's end. The lateral vitrines help guide the viewer along to the end-point by endowing the space with a rhythm of high and low visual notes. They also provide tonal oscillations through bright spotlights and shimmery textiles to enhance the blue space, while the lateral walls, painted in an azure wash and decorated with white clouds, are intended to represent the skies. Here, light specks appear likened to stars and silken fabrics allegorized to clouds<sup>13</sup> in order to make the inside space suggestive of the empyrean realms. Through light and tonal metaphors spectators are prompted visually to embark on a spiritual ascent of sorts.





Figure 8 First gallery on the ground floor, with lateral relics cases and the larger tripartite relics case of Dr. Mustafa Chamran at the end, Martyrs' Museum, Tehran. (Photo © author, November 2007; color figure available online)

As visitors go forward, framed on either side by the double arcades of lit cases, their paths culminate in the gallery's focal point, namely larger end cases. These are typically reserved for leading members of the Islamic Revolution; to these cases are added interactive sound boxes. Each of the sound boxes includes a portrait photo of the martyr and a screen that offers a digital slide-show of the martyr in various contexts. There are also several buttons that the visitor can push to hear biographical information in Persian, Arabic or English. Once one of the buttons is pressed, a narrator welcomes the museum-goer to "this pleasant and purifying treasury, where we respect all-time [*sic*] martyrs in our history. This box includes the relics of [so-and-so]." After greeting the viewer by specifying that the "relics" (*asar*) case is a "treasury" (*ganjina*), the voice then presents an official script on the martyred hero, while a background melody, somewhat New Age in its trance-inducing acoustic harmonies, helps to set a meditative mood.

Like other technological gadgets and interactive media, these sound boxes are relative novelties in the Martyrs' Museum. Technology has been harnessed for optimum effect in the Euro-American museum world since the 1970s [Cameron 1972: 190], to create new electronic environments that enhance the pedagogical effect of exhibits. As in other parts of the world the younger generation in Iran is now much more familiar and comfortable with audiovisual learning, televisual interfacing and the web's ever-expanding "blogistan." As an enhanced mechanism of interactive learning for young and old, local or foreign, these sound boxes give memory a distinctive voice. They also allow a gallery visitor to interact with his or her space in an auditory and tactile manner. As a result, the sound



boxes draw viewers into a master narrative by stimulating multiple senses beyond the merely visual. Indeed, according to museum staff and officials at the Bunyad-i Shahid, the electronic and technological components of the Martyrs' Museum will continue to expand in the coming years so as to achieve a multi-lingual, multimedia environment. And this novel interactive environment is intended to help achieve an activation of this ritualized *lieu de mémoire*.

War memories are typically articulated in the public domain through official and hegemonic master-narratives that displace sectional experiences [Ashplant *et al.* 2000: 16]. Thus, memory, just like its place of affixing, is always a contested environment because it takes shape through the careful craft of rhetorical expression. In order to counteract potential challenges and counter-claims official memory narratives can choose to launch a pre-emptive strike by folding dissident voices and oppositional accounts under a dominant mode of discourse. Even when pluralistic and accommodating, the history museums function (much like memory) as ideological battlegrounds over a "normative" and "objective" presentation of facts and figures.

These issues are at stake in the Martyrs' Museum, as the soldiers who contributed to and perished in the war effort were neither wholly from Tehran nor were they all adherents of the Muslim faith. For these reasons, galleries on the museum's second floor include martyrs from Iran's provinces. They also include a special section dedicated to martyrs belonging to Iran's religious minorities, which includes 88 Christians, 9 Zoroastrians, and 16 members of Iran's Jewish community (respectfully referred to as *Kalimi*).<sup>14</sup> The cases of Zoroastrian martyrs include copies of the *Avesta* and the abridged *Khurda Avesta*; those of the *Kalimis*, small Stars of David and other Jewish paraphernalia; and those of Christians, necklaces with cross pendants and copies of the Bible in Persian. These minorities are represented as having fulfilled a national duty that is here displayed in a putatively ecumenical and "politically correct" manner.

Like other ritual spaces that neutralize zones of contestation and absorb minority narratives into a hegemonic discourse, the Martyrs' Museum carefully modulates and effectively magnifies its rhetorical purview, leaving little room for ethno-religious expressions that might be seen as alternative, resistant, subversive or somehow counter-hegemonic. Indeed, though the museum includes this minor tribute to Iran's religious minorities, a number of motifs deployed throughout the museum anchor it deeply within the spheres of Islamic devotional life and most especially Persian Shiite commemorative and mourning practices. Alongside the spatial hierarchies and religious overtones of the relics cases a number of overarching motifs indubitably ensconce the museum within the realm of the sacred in its Islamic iterations.

First and foremost, upon stepping into this museum a visitor encounters a separate prayer-room (*namaz-khana*) that can be visited and used by those wishing to pray as they enter or exit. From this prayer-room a pre-recorded call to prayer (*azan*) can be heard at intervals in the first nave-like gallery space. Upon leaving the first gallery and entering the second area on the ground floor the visitor comes across a large mirror depicting a gold dome with a variety of inscriptions [Figure 9], and further along in the gallery's farthest corner a grilled recess flanked on either side by two flags [Figure 10]. More than just a multimedia



Figure 9 Ashura mirror with gold dome of the Shrine of Inam Hoseyn in Karbala, second gallery on ground floor, Martyrs' Museum, Tehran. (Photo © author, November 2007; color figure available online)



Figure 10 Saqqakhana flanked with the flags of Iran and the Bunyad-i Shahid, second gallery on ground floor, Martyrs' Museum, Tehran. (Photo © author, November 2007; color figure available online)

installation in mirror-, tile-, and brick-work, these two decorative areas forcibly inscribe the relics cases (and thus the museum and its attendant presentation of memory) into Shiite religious practice. In other words, visuals act here as aids for the telling of history, as well as potential catalysts of sectarian devotional behavior.

The large mirror represents the soaring gold dome of the Shrine of Imam Hoseyn, here represented as topped with a flag inscribed with the vocative "*Ya Husayn-i Shahid!*" [Figure 9]. Located in modern-day Iraq, the shrine marks Hoseyn's burial site and commemorates his martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala. It is considered the holiest of Shiite shrines and therefore a central node for Shiite shrine visitation (*ziyarat*). In Iran, commemorative celebrations of his death take place on a yearly basis during the tenth day (known as *Ashura*) of the month of Muharram. Ashura mourning rituals, which can be both stationary and ambulatory, typically occur outdoors [Chelkowski 1985: 20]. They can also be urban processions, which can be co-opted—as they were in the case of the Islamic Revolution—for political ends by mobilizing the masses, thus turning open-air processions into public demonstrations, transforming religious gestures (such as breast-beating) into bodily signs of revolt (raised and clenched fists<sup>15</sup>), and converting mourning chants into anti-establishment slogans. In brief, Ashura in modern Iran has incited and harnessed religious zeal for political and military ends. Trafficking in polyvalent symbols, the spheres of religious and political life thus engage in an endless cycle of self-reinforcing symbolic cross-pollinations.

In Iran, the Iran–Iraq War was pitched in Shiite terms as the revived Battle of Karbala, while Ashura ceremonies became consecrated arenas for public mourning. By drawing upon the analogical maxim that "all battlefields were Karbala, all months were Muharram, and all days were Ashura" [Abedi and Legenhausen 1986: 251], the war gained meta-historical proportions.<sup>16</sup> Such associations are clearly transferred through the mirror's main inscription, which similarly states that "every earth is Karbala and every month is Muharram." Interestingly, the mirror is based on a painting held in the permanent art collection of the Martyrs' Museum [Anasseri 2003: 100]. Rather than placing the actual painting in the gallery the museum staff have preferred to hang a reflective mirror that achieves the desired effect of drawing in the visitor and reflecting him or her into the gallery's sacred space, in a similar manner in which the Iran–Iraq War was refracted through the religious lexicon of the Karbala paradigm.

Much as the Karbala mirror adds a religious dimension to the museum, so does the small grilled recess in the corner of the second gallery [Figure 10]. The structure intentionally mimics a Persian ceremonial public structure that holds water for passers-by.<sup>17</sup> Known as a *saqqakhana*, this structure can be an independent building shaped like a cube or octagon, lodged in the corner of a store, or else it is a shelf-like space placed on the side of a private residence [Bunyadlu (1381) 2002: 90–91]. *Saqqakhana*s are usually decorated with stone-, tile- or mirror-work. Those with tile-work similar to the *saqqakhana* in the Martyrs' Museum may also include a number of depicted scenes and inscriptions. Scenes are usually Shiite in character and show the Imams, Ashura festivities, and scenes from the Battle of Karbala. These depictions focus particularly on members of Hoseyn's following who suffered and died from thirst on the plain

of Karbala in 680 [Bunyadlu (1381) 2002: 95; Daftari 2002: 73]. Such structures are thus not just functional; they also recall the Shiite martyrs of Karbala, syntactically turning the past tense into a gerundial experience that unfolds visually in the here and now.

Inscriptions on *saqqakhana* tiles usually include verses from Ashura commemorations and Shiite passion plays (*taziyeh*), many of which strengthen the recurrent themes of thirst and persecution [Bunyadlu (1381) 2002: 97–100]. In the *saqqakhana* lodged into a corner of the first-floor gallery in the Martyrs' Museum, an inscription praises the rightful rule (*vilayat*) of Imam Ali long ago, and promises the devotee protection from harm. Above the inscription and lodged into the wall are paper cards—the pious ephemera, it seems, of *ziyarat* practices. The grille itself is decorated with colorful prayer beads, and inside the recess are headbands invoking Mohammad and Imam Ali, half-melted candles, and a small water bowl decorated with a hand. The hand (*panjah*) functions as a Shiite symbol for the five members of the Prophet's household (*ahl al-bayt*), who include the Prophet Mohammad, his daughter Fatimeh and her husband Ali, and their two sons Hasan and Hoseyn. Within the context of drinking-fountains, moreover, the *panjah* alludes symbolically to Imam Hoseyn's half-brother, Abul-Fazlal al-Abbas, whose hand was severed when he attempted to fetch drinking-water from the Euphrates River during the Battle of Karbala.<sup>18</sup> Like other *saqqakhana*s that include *ex-voto* candles, water implements, rosaries, ribbons, lights, candles, mirrors and photos [Bunyadlu (1381) 2002: 101–05; Anasseri 2003: 98–99], this permanent installation piece attempts to convey the fleeting moment of popular Muslim devotional practice in its Persian Shiite contexts. It is not, however, the accretion of real praxis, but rather it is “affective” in both senses of the word: it is a staged moment of transience and also mimics the visual palimpsest emerging from pilgrims' emotional responses and devotional practices.

A viewer's involvement is managed not only by the surrounding display cases but also is doubly demarcated by the *saqqakhana*'s two flanking flags, one of which is the national flag of Iran and the second of which bears the logo of Bunyad-i Shahid. All elements of the Martyrs' Museum are symbolically amalgamated in this charged corner, thus providing further clues as to how the gallery exhibits are intended to function and how a visitor is supposed to act ritually in and interact with the spaces. Here the mixing of popular piety, Iranian pride and the glorification of martyrdom converge into a powerful trio, and it is this site-specific *saqqakhana* that best encapsulates the religious, nationalistic and moral grounds on which the museum stakes its claims of legitimacy as an official mouthpiece and permanent storehouse for the deceased and their remembrance.

The *saqqakhana* installation piece prompts a series of questions. To what extent do visitors to the Martyrs' Museum engage in ritual behavior in the gallery spaces? How and on what occasions does the museum use its commemorative areas in support of religious ceremonies and/or national holidays? And what are the viewers' responses: are they actively engaged and respondent to the spaces and displays, or are they disenchanted, unmoved or, worse, merely bored by what they see?



The answer to these questions is simply that the viewers' actions and responses span the whole gamut of possibilities. Based on three full days of observation and interviews with visitors in November 2007, I noticed that the museum means different things to different people. The visitor brings to the mix his or her own life experiences and thus acts as the primary determinant and activator of this potentially "cultic" memory space. In other words, a viewer actively fills in the museum's semiotic gaps since those gaps are based on personal memory. And memory, as Gaynor Kavanagh notes so eloquently in his study of the role of trauma and memory in history museums, is nothing if not "the pivot of the personal" [2002: 111].

To adult males ranging from 35 to 60 years old, many of whom contributed to the war efforts, this memorial space is still a living memory. They come to pay tribute to fellows of their generation, even to their own acquaintances and friends, and to recognize iconic figures of the war. Some utter the *bismillah* as they move from case to case, while simultaneously saying prayers as they finger through their rosaries. Others visibly try to hold back tears but, if unable, begin to sob openly. Theirs is a solemn and painful experience, one that even the most critical and callous of observers would be hard-pressed not to find deeply saddening.

To other visitors, such as children, a visit to the museum is typically part of a mandatory school trip. Although some of the exhibits might attract the youngsters for a brief moment, they easily get bored and their attentions become distracted. For teenagers and people in their twenties who have little knowledge of or interest in the war, the museum experience can be either a cursory or an instructive one. Some of the younger visitors were blasé and too busy chatting on or texting with their cellphones. In such cases their audiovisual and televisual needs were fulfilled by their portable contraptions rather than the sound boxes of high-ranking martyrs. Other young visitors, however, do visit out of sheer inquisitiveness. For example, one college-age woman admitted that she had come across some war photographs in the library of Tehran University and, wanting to learn more about the subject, decided to visit the museum. For her the museum was not an emotional enterprise; it was a source of data for one academic's quest to retrieve lost information that could be used in further historical study.

For foreign visitors the Martyrs' Museum can also perform a variety of functions. Europeans coming particularly from France, Italy, Germany or Austria find the museum helps to contextualize the two most famous episodes of recent Iranian history, the Islamic Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War. The museum gives a real face to the raw facts. For other visitors, such as those coming from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, India or Pakistan, the museum holds a special place within today's "pilgrimage tourism" industry. For instance, in November 2007 a group of some twenty Pakistani women wearing black *chadors* left the city of Lahore and came to Iran on an organized *ziyarat*-tour of the country. While in the museum these women, led by their male tour guide, wept openly in mourning as they touched and rubbed the relics cases. But when asked if they were familiar with the life story of such-and-such a martyr their overwhelming response was in the negative. In this instance the historical content of the museum was almost irrelevant; it was its function as a religiously consecrated



site within the larger ritual landscape of Islamic pilgrimage practices that invoked power and immediacy.

As suggested by these varied reactions, the psychic responses to death can range from casual indifference to intellectual curiosity and from museum fatigue to emotional heartbreak. The drop-in visitor responds differently from the museum-goer who has purposefully come to the Martyrs' Museum to join in its official celebrations on various holidays.<sup>19</sup> Similarly Iranians, Muslims from the greater Middle East, and Europeans come here with various sensibilities and literacies. So although the museum's sacred dimensions are certainly sought visually through its spatial designs and religious motifs, in the end the ritual and emotional responses of its visitors remain in the realm of the personal.

## MEMORY'S UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The Martyrs' Museum reveals the extent to which both museums and memories are living entities that can be experienced, updated and relived in a variety of ways. Museums and memories indeed share an alluring array of similarities, particularly in the way in which both engender a kind of social union by creating new "dream spaces" where emotions and senses coalesce into new fields, some mental and others visual, of identity and image formation [Kavanagh 2000: 3]. Similarly, both merge real with virtual spaces, as well as aspects of profane and sacred life, to create experiential sites that are neither given, inert nor uncontested. In the case of the Martyrs Museum in particular, the inhumation of objects within a sacred cenotaph-like space serves in fact to prompt a larger process of memory exhumation. The museum can therefore become a site of remembrance, and possibly of cohesion and consensus too.

In the Martyrs' Museum, however, memory is visually operational and enacted through a carefully scripted *mise-en-scène*. It is here institutionalized through a master narrative that blends the realms of the sacred and the profane so as to avoid social rupture and fragmentation. Indeed, rather than functioning as an individual cognitive process, memory is here (attempted to be) harnessed as a collective, transcendent reality through the museum's spatial strategies and its displays. Its success as a museological "memory-machine"—along with its effectiveness in the presentation of trauma and its overall appeal in the visualization of national memory—nevertheless remains to be determined as the years pass.

Despite such uncertainties the museum's synthesis of sacred and profane space is in turn matched by its clear function as a religio-civic institution. According to Mr. Alizadeh, Director of martyrs' museums and treasures at the Bunyad-i Shahid, the Martyrs' Museum provides but one example of the *dini-farhangi*, or religio-cultural, synthesis aspired to and implemented within post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>20</sup> This religio-cultural fusion calls into question and even subverts European Enlightenment ideas about museums as civic organs of a secular state. It also provides a new typology for identity formation within the process of "culture-making" (*farhang-sazi*) in post-revolutionary Iran. Most critically, this process does not disarticulate the religious from the cultural; both zones instead are

decisively amalgamated and re-entangled into one single, hybridized entity that seeks to stimulate traditional Shiite Islamic rituals, while simultaneously inscribing them within the realm of civic duty and collective memory.

Beyond the classification of the Martyrs' Museum as a *dini-farhangi* cultural product, the museum, its future, and even memory (as presented there) still face a number of problems that are not so easily resolved through creative conceptual coupling. Only a few can be touched on here, and these concern the museum's longevity and relevance, its use in cultural entrepreneurialism, and its actual benefits in stimulating consensus and healing.

First is the question of time. Contemporary actors in Iran must relate to past events, to explain them and save them for the historical record. However, such relations and presentations are always achieved through selective decision-making, through hierarchical spatial structures and strategic methods of display, and quite regularly through the lens of religious and/or national pride. In the case of the Martyrs' Museum these issues all come to the fore since it is dealing with both past and present. In other words, the museum is bivalent in its temporality since it is a visual witness to a traumatic past while also acting with the aim to implement and ensure a particular future of remembering. In this case, public memory is certainly induced but stuck in the past, and therefore bound to be somewhat entropic [Casey 2004: 17]. In other words, some may argue that the Martyrs' Museum, like the theme of martyrdom that it seeks to promote, is ultimately bound to decline and lose its relevance as society moves towards more promising horizons. After all, with time, people forget.

The second question revolves around the other, less laudable motives of the Martyrs' Museum as it is involved in the religio-cultural business of martyrdom and its promotion. Certainly, like other history museums elsewhere in the world, it is involved in what Chidester and Linenthal have identified as "venerative consumption," in which the profane realm of cultural and historical tourism gets an encrustation of religious praxis.<sup>21</sup> However, when such venerative consumption is in fact a consumption of traumatic memory, it runs the risk of becoming a solipsistic exercise in fear-mongering, through the creation of a permanent state of fear and the catalyzing of a kind of communal psychotic freeze that becomes almost impossible to thaw. Cultural institutions and the mass media that engage in the business of presenting memory, especially that relating to traumatic events like revolution and war, can therefore become nothing more than fear-entrepreneurs who promote cultures of despair rather than cultures of hope [Füredi 2002; Stearns 2006: 480]. More bluntly, the Martyrs' Museum, and especially the staff members at the Bunyad-i Shahid involved in its curation and mission, may well have at stake the maintenance of the *status quo*, through the muffled yet infectious tactics of trauma and fear, redeployed and expanded in museum form as a defensive response to increasingly loud public calls for social and political change within Iran.

The Martyrs' Museum also plays an observable role within today's troubled realm of Iranian *Realpolitik*—a realm that, like the museum itself, is partly living in the present moment and partly parasitic on its revolutionary and wartime past. Beyond its temporal bivalence and its involvement in the body politic, however, emerges the third and final question: what are the museum's actual effects on

visitors, and are such effects harmful or beneficial? As Gaynor Kavanagh has underscored, museums that involve personal memories of trauma—the Martyrs' Museum being a case in point—can be either: (1) artificial, manipulative, exploitative, and thus damaging, or else (2) empowering, liberating, life changing, and hence therapeutic [2002: 120–121]. Although one can point to the museum's trading in trauma and memory it is much less easy to determine whether it functions positively in an individual's healing process and sense of belonging, or rather instrumentalizes feelings of loss and grief for greater political ends—all the while admitting to the fact that one possibility does not necessarily exclude the other.

Regardless of the Martyrs' Museum's varied effects, which are very difficult to gauge without more ethnographic work, at the very least it can precipitate further debate and discussion on the roles and functions of museums in different cultural contexts at the dawn of the 21st century. As a graphically outspoken memorandum on how memory can be formed and transformed through the visual vestiges of revolution and war within a modern Iranian context, this particular museum certainly engages in the tricky business of memory. And memory is perennially unstable, eminently disputable and, as Jay Winter points out, "always just that: a business, shaped by the character of the community which undertook it" [1995: 90]. To be sure, the Martyrs' Museum is nothing but unfinished business—a work in progress by those who stake claims to legitimacy and truth—that awaits a further "conceptual reworking," or else, perhaps at some point in the future, total dismantling.

## NOTES

1. The term "martyr" (singular, *shahid*; plural, *shuhada'*) is adopted throughout this study since it is used in Iranian sources to describe those who died for the cause of the Islamic Revolution or on the battlefield during the Iran–Iraq War. The term's religious overtones are thus retained, because those who perished "in the way of God" (*fi sabil Allah*) or in "holy war" (*jihad*) are believed to receive divine redemption in the afterlife. For a general discussion of martyrdom in Islam, see Cook [2007]; and for an analysis of martyrdom in the writings of prominent figures of the Islamic Revolution, see Abedi and Legenhausen [1986].
2. Due to constraints of space, the museum's section on female martyrs will not be discussed in this article.
3. Other martyrs' museums are located in Karaj, Varamin, Kermanshah, Qazvin and Isfahan, as well as in other cities in the provinces of Zenjan and Chahar Mahal and Bakhtiyari. Most prominent among the war-zone martyrs' museums is the complex in Khoramshahr, a southern city that was severely damaged by Iraqi forces during the first two years of the Iran–Iraq War; on Khoramshahr, see Bombardier's contribution to this issue.
4. For a discussion of murals representing martyrs of the Iran–Iraq War sponsored by the Bunyad-i Shahid, see Gruber [2008b: 25–37], and Marzolph [2003].
5. As noted by Mr. Alizadeh, Director of the Administration of Treasuries (*Idara-yi Ganjinaha*) at the Bunyad-i Shahid, these strategies of lighting and isolation are purposefully used so that the objects seem more like artworks. They are treated as such not only in the display cases but also in the museum's conservation lab, which is dedicated to preserving and stabilizing a wide array of materials, including metal objects,

paper fragments and blood-stained textiles. These kinds of materials, especially those with traces of blood, require the expert attention of specialist conservators [author's interview, November 2007].

6. For a discussion of life-story approaches or life-history narrations in conveying trauma, see Leydesdorff *et al.* [1999: 12–17].
7. This relic-painting includes an inscription signed by the artist Ansari that specifies that it was given by the Isfahan branch of the Bunyad-i Shahid to the Martyrs' Museum in Tehran to commemorate the Week of the Holy Defense in 1379 AH (2001 CE), a year that was dubbed the "Year of Amir al-Mu'minin" (i.e., the year of Imam Hoseyn). The painting thus functions as a kind of votive offering with Shiite overtones within the context of the yearly commemorative ceremonies of the Iran–Iraq War known as the "Week of Holy Defense" (*hafta-i dafa-i muqaddas*) or the "Week of War" (*hafta-i jang*).
8. Avini is best known for his war documentaries as well as a television series entitled *The Chronicles of Victory* (*Riwayat-i Fath*). A statement lauding martyrdom, attributed to Avini, is included in his relics case—"No one knows the secret of blood except the martyrs. Life is beautiful but martyrdom is more beautiful than life." For a recent study of Avini and his life, see Tajdini [(1374) 1995].
9. For a more detailed discussion of the circumstances of Fahmida's martyrdom, the Tehran mural dedicated to him, and an illustrated children's book on his exploits, see Gruber [2008b: 31–33, Figs. 8–9].
10. For a discussion of cenotaphs in the Islamic world, see Blair [n.d.].
11. In this sense, the mission of the Foundation for the Oppressed and Wounded is rather similar to that of the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA). It is also worthwhile to note here that local branches of the VA have opened a number of Veterans' Museums throughout the United States, which likewise contain war artifacts, personal memorabilia and dioramic displays lauding the contribution of soldiers to American war efforts over the centuries [McDaniel 1994]. Often these museums provide a carefully smoothed narrative by omitting oppositional voices or competing narratives. For example, in the Wisconsin Veterans Museum's exhibit on the Vietnam War, there is not a single mention of the anti-war movement of the 1960s. For a museum of war art in the United States, see the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum in Chicago. A cross-cultural study on war memorials (functioning also as art museums) would be fruitful, as it would shed further light on the museological iterations of war and trauma in various cross-cultural contexts.
12. Sometimes these laminated portrait cards of Khomeini include an image of Karbala on their reverse, since Khomeini wished to liberate the shrine of Imam Hoseyn during the Iran–Iraq War (images of Karbala on the backs of these cards are mentioned in Sciolino [2000: 179]).
13. The white silken fabrics could also be compared to white burial shrouds or the white sheets worn by Muslims during *hajj*; the latter are called *ihram*, a word literally meaning "consecrated" or "sacred." If one were to interpret such fabrics in the museum cases as burial shrouds or *ihram*, then these add yet another sacramental dimension to the gallery spaces.
14. On the use of the modern Persian term *Kalimi* to designate the Jewish community of Iran, see Netzer [n.d.]. The term derives from the nickname given to Moses in Islamic sources, i.e., *Kalim Allah* or "God's Interlocutor" [Koran 4: 164].
15. The clenched fist is of course a salute and logo associated outside Iran with left-wing activists such as modern Marxists, socialists, communists, anarchists, trade unionists and black nationalists. It is an expression of solidarity, strength or just defiance of authority.

16. For Khomeini's discussion of how Ashura mourning sessions can spur national and martyrial zeal, see Davis [2003: 49].
17. A second *saqqakhana* is also found on the third floor of the museum, dedicated to female martyrs.
18. On the *panjah*—also known in Arabic as *khamisa* (five) and *yad Fatima* (Hand of Fatimeh)—and its various uses and symbolic meanings in both Sunni and Shiite spheres, see Suleman [forthcoming]; and also Bombardier's contribution to this issue.
19. The Martyrs' Museum celebrates and hosts a number of celebrations during the year. These include two major military commemorations: the "Week of Holy Defense" (*hafta-i dafa-i muqaddas*) and the "Week of the Volunteer Paramilitary Forces" (*hafta-i basij*), as well as religious holidays, most especially Ashura.
20. Author's interview, November 2007.
21. See the analysis of the *USS Arizona* at Pearl Harbor in Chidester and Linenthal [1995: 4]. These authors point out that profane space is mixed in with ceremonial and religious practices (including prayer and pilgrimage practices), resulting in a complex dynamic that extols patriotic heroism, divine mission, and the redemptive power of martial sacrifice.

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